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A Fictional Exploration of Breast Cancer

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A Fictional Exploration of Breast Cancer

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By

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English & Journalism/Broadcasting Major

The College at Brockport

August 27, 2014

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Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.

Abstract:

The thesis that follows is made up of two parts. First, there is a reflection paper, which includes a small literature review related to the topic chosen as well as a discussion of the creative process, a plan for the future of my creative work, and some issues and questions that arose during writing. Following the reflection paper is a 40 page excerpt of a young adult novel I plan to finish in the future entitled “Anastasia’s Warrior.” This excerpt follows a female main character that is 16 years of age as her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer and they navigate her treatment.

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1. Young Adult Market Now

For my thesis, I have decided to focus on and explore one of my areas of learning: my creative writing major. The genre I have decided to write in is a Young Adult fiction novel. However, for the purpose of this project, I have decided to submit an excerpt of the novel. I have dreamed of writing books for a long time. I believe this is an excellent opportunity to start getting my name out there and getting published. In my future as a writer, I want to write books that will entice young people to read like I used to. I want to write a book that will end up in a young person's stack he or she brings home from the library. To write a book that will make someone love to read like I did is my dream.

My first step in starting this project was to research publishing companies via their website to see whether different publishing houses have any requirements for what is classified as a young adult novel. Specifically, I looked for a page count, a word count or any age group guidelines. The guidelines I took notes from came from six different publishing companies: Penguin Group (USA), Tuscan Press LLC, Tanglewood Books, Medallion Media Group, Sourcebooks, and Fire and Ice Young Adult. I also browsed many other publishing companies online. However, many had the same advice or asked for a specific type of fiction. For example, I found a few Catholic companies and one that only wanted to publish books featuring a strong LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) character or issue.

Some of the requirements on their lists were more like guidelines or suggestions than actual requirements. For example, one publisher suggested keeping the dialogue very current and not dating it. Another called for a strong opening hook to catch the reader's attention. Otherwise, the actual definition of a young adult novel was not a concrete one. The general age group they suggested is anywhere from 12 to 19 years of age, with the protagonist also between those ages.

The word count varied as well, from 40,000 words to 150,000 words. In addition, there were understandable requests like no drugs, alcohol, foul language, unnecessary violence, or underage sex. Overall, the suggestions were to get an agent for your book, know what has been done in the past, and specifically pay attention to what the publisher has previously published. For example, I would not send my book to the examples of a Catholic press or the LGBT press mentioned previously because my book does not fit in either of those categories.

After this research, I realized that I still did not fully understand what constitutes a young adult novel. I was fortunate enough to enroll in a class about young adult literature in which we read several books in this category and then discussed a possible definition or common characteristics that we saw among the novels. Mainly, young adult novels tend to explore societal issues from a young adult perspective. For example, my book will be exploring cancer from the perspective of a girl in tenth grade in high school and about 16 years old. The most common type of young adult novel deals with coming of age experiences, like dealing with their blooming sexuality and forming their own identity. My book will also be exploring this subject matter. The content of young adult novels can deal with a thematic issue. This is often called a problem novel. In other words, the protagonist gets themselves into some kind of trouble or becomes emotional in some way and asks an adult for help, who quickly solves the issue and the novel ends with the protagonist happy once more. Because of this repeatedly seen basic plot thread, there is a negative light around having a novel be called a problem novel. For this reason, I would like to avoid this model and produce something very different. Perhaps the most common characteristic of a young adult novel is the purpose of reading. Young adults read novels that let them know that they are not alone; that someone has gone through what they are going through before and it worked out pretty well for them.

2. Current Young Adult Novels

The best advice I have gotten from a professor throughout the course of this project is not to research how to write a young adult novel, but to read examples that have already been successful. Therefore, the next step I took for this project was to figure out which specific age group I would like to target with my book. This consisted of a small literature review. I read other young adult books in the different age groups that deal with cancer or parental loss, and sometimes both. To situate my novel among Young Adult texts that focus on parental sicknesses I read Melina Marchetta's *Saving Francesca*. To understand how Young Adult texts focused on parental loss, I read Gayle Forman's *If I Stay*, Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*, Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*, and Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. Marthe Jocelyn's *Would You* focused on familial sickness and loss of the main character's sister. Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* also dealt with a sister's sickness and death but in this case the loss was caused by cancer. In contrast, Chris Crutcher's *Deadline* and John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* both have main characters going through cancer.

Melina Marchetta's *Saving Francesca* (2004) is a novel about a girl dealing with her mother's depression. Over the course of the novel, the main character makes discoveries about life and her mother's depression, including what caused it. After reading all of the novels I have, I believe that this novel exhibits a character closest to the age I would like to make my main character. Everything felt natural and real while I was reading it, including the main character. She definitely seemed like a real teenager as they act in the world I know. For example, when she is upset, she would storm out; she acted out a little for attention; she did a few things she probably was not supposed to; and she even ran away once. This novel also made me realize that my character will be inquisitive about her mother's illness. In the novel, Francesca looked up her

mother's symptoms to try to figure out what was wrong with her. It will be imperative for my character to do the same with her mother's cancer. In addition, one of the most important things I learned from this novel is something that Francesca was feeling and expressed to the reader: "And being that happy makes me feel guilty. Because I shouldn't be. Not while my mum is feeling the way she is. How I can dare to be happy is beyond me, and I hate my guts for it" (Marchetta 114). I think this quote perfectly embodies how my character will feel when her mother is sick. She could express this to her friends but they will not understand because they do not have a sick mother and that is exactly what Francesca went through as well.

Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* (2009) is a young adult novel in the point of view of a teenage girl. The girl and her family get in a horrible car accident that kills her mother, father, and little brother and leaves the girl in a coma. She continues to narrate the novel in her coma but walks around separately from her body. The novel is written in a diary-like format split up with the time marking different sections. This novel was really interesting because it helped me to see the advantage of writing a novel in first person point of view. It is almost as if she is talking to the reader as she decides if she wants to live on without her family or die along with them. This aligns the reader with the main character so that they hope for the best possible outcome. However, the diary format was slightly disconcerting because there was more background information than I thought was necessary. Therefore, I decided that if flashbacks are going to be necessary in my novel, I should at least connect it to what is happening in the present, much like how this novel worked. For example, if there was a section devoted to her boyfriend coming to visit her, it would flash back to a time when she was not in a coma. This showed their connection and how much they cared about each other. In relation, I think this novel had a good balance of mild sexual and romantic content. They did not actually have sex in the course of the novel, but

they were intimate in a way that was real and believable for someone her age. That leads me to believe that the age group this novel is targeting is on the slightly more mature end than some of the other novels. It could be the age group I target my novel to as well.

Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons* (1994) is a novel about a 13 year old girl who moves with her father to Ohio after her mother dies. The novel consists of two different stories: the main character's story about her friend Phoebe that she is telling her grandparents and the story of their journey to Idaho to see her mother's grave. This novel was the easiest read of all of the novels I read for this project. Although it was almost 300 pages, it took me less than a day to read it from cover to cover. This leads me to believe that I want to aim a little older on the target age group with my novel. However, this novel did help me realize something else very important that I need to remember: a mother is such a central piece of a person's life and a person does not realize how much she really does for you until she is gone and not doing those things for you anymore. Other people are going to have to pick up the slack that the mother leaves and it is not always going to be as good as if she had done it. Mothers are more important than we realize and I want my readers to think about that.

Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* (1997) is a novel written in poetry about a girl in the 1930s during the Dust Bowl in the Midwest. Over the course of the novel, they are dealing with the hardships of the Dust Bowl when an accident leads to the death of the girl's pregnant mother. The novel continues with the girl and her father grieving and starting to heal. As a result of this novel, I decided I will probably never write a novel in poetry. One reason is that I am not very good at writing or reading and analyzing poetry. Another reason is that I felt that the poetry took away emotion from what was going on. The poem in which she describes what happened to her pregnant mother was so detached and informative; it barely had any ounce of emotion in it.

Coming off of reading *Walk Two Moons* and knowing that mothers are so important, it felt very fake. The only positive remark I can give that this novel taught me is to have something happy to focus on besides the horrible things going on with the medical issues. In this novel, it was the main character's piano playing that brought her some joy.

Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) is a novel written in multiple points of view and a young adult novel. This novel takes place after the main character, Jerry, has already lost his mother to cancer. She is only mentioned about five times in the novel, but the text reveals that there is an obvious effect that this loss had on him. While the novel does not deal with the course of diagnosis and treatment, it made me think about how the novel succeeds in other ways. For one, it made me realize that I have to make my characters supremely real to make it more believable. In the novel, Jerry's father was slightly absent because he was working often. This made me realize that I can not gloss over the characters of the mother and father and bring them in on the medical issues. I need to give them jobs and lives outside of their children. I also need to make my main character's relationship with them real and teenager-like. In addition, my novel will need to have a focus other than the cancer and the medical aspects, especially because the main character will not be the one dealing with the cancer. In *The Chocolate War*, there was a focus on the chocolate sale, but there were also the loss of his mother, his relationship with his father, and his involvement with the football team. In addition, this novel made me think that my main character will want to think and wonder about life without her mother. Most of the novels I focused on in this study focus on what happens while the person is sick, but this novel deals with the aftermath and how his mother's death affected his life after the fact. While this novel had a lot of aspects that were done well, I also learned a couple of examples of what I would not like to do. For example, I think there were too many different points of view and it was confusing. It

was not limited to a couple different characters and the speaker was not introduced at the beginning of the section. Therefore, I had to figure out who was speaking in every new section. Also, this novel was very heavily male dominated. The main characters were all men or boys and the only women mentioned were not focused on much. This gave me the idea to balance the amount of male and female characters. Perhaps I will give my main character a brother in addition to the mother and father; maybe I will give her a male friend or two.

Marthe Jocelyn's *Would You* (2008) is also a young adult novel narrated in first person point of view. In this novel, the focus is two sisters that are very close. Over the course of the novel, one sister gets hit by a car and goes into a coma. The novel is broken into sort of chapters by days and then further by subtitles that relate to the content. Some sections consist of action in the present tense but others are introspection by the sister not in the coma. My favorite aspect of this novel that is intriguing is the title of the novel. The author connected it all together in a very interesting way by the girls and their friends engaging in an ongoing game of Would You Rather. Basically, someone would say would you rather do this thing or this other thing and the other friends would all choose which action they would rather do. It often ended up in a debate or the entire group laughing about it. Basically, it was something other than the girl in the coma to think about and something to keep the mood lighter so the reader would not feel completely depressed by reading the book. However, the book ends with the sister in the coma dying. This led me to realize that all of the books I had read thus far are about people dying. It made me wonder if my novel would be different in a good way or a bad way if the character with cancer lives. Death is a natural end but life is more hopeful and open ended. Another aspect of this novel that was very well done by the author is the feeling of desperation that the main character felt because she could not do anything to help her sister come back from the coma. I think at

some point in all of our lives we see someone close to us hurt and wish we could alleviate their pain. But, in all actuality, there is nothing that we can do for that person. It is a very real and human feeling that this novel made me realize I need to capture over the course of my novel.

Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* (2004) is a novel in multiple points of views about a family dealing with a teenage girl that has a rare form of Leukemia, which is a cancer in the blood. One of the first aspects of this novel that surprised me was the sexual content, which points to the fact that this novel is not a young adult fiction novel. The moment I read it, I knew I would not include nearly as much sexual content. However, I still decided to include the novel in my final analysis because of how it dealt with the medical topics and because of how much I learned from this novel. The medical topics were approached in a way that may have been too smart for me. From my experience with cancer in my family and with cancer fundraisers, I know quite a bit about cancer. However, every time the novel introduced a new medical term, the novel made me feel dumb for not knowing what the terms meant or to what they were referring. For that reason, even after researching breast cancer for my novel and learning what I need to, I am going to make a conscious effort to balance the amount of medical information and terms so my audience does not feel the way I did in reading this novel. Another aspect of the novel that taught me what I would like to do was the length. I felt that the novel was too long, with too many asides, too much back story, and too many short spurts of revelations by the different characters than events happening in the present time of the novel. The whole process felt dragged out and longer than it needed to be. I also learned what I perceive to be excessive emotion. In previous creative writing classes, professors would warn about this exact problem, but I never thought I understood what constituted excessive. With this novel, the emotion would be introduced and then the character would go on and on about how they feel, when I really

understood how they felt from the first mention. Lastly, I learned how I would like to not take my reader by surprise. Going into reading this novel, I thought I knew what I was getting into; I had seen the movie and cried over its sadness like every other viewer. However, the movie took some liberties and did not follow the book exactly and this led to my great surprise at the ending to the book. Towards the end of the novel, we find out that unless Anna donates her kidney to her sister Kate, Kate will die as a result of the cancer and many medical complications. Anna wins her medical emancipation from her parents through the trial and her lawyer is given medical power of attorney over her. Anna and her attorney then head to the hospital but get in a serious car accident that results in Anna having irreversible brain damage. In the end, Kate gets Anna's kidney anyway and lives, beating the cancer and surprising readers who saw the movie and believed that Kate was the one to die, leaving Anna with both of her kidneys and alive. However, I do not know if I blame the book or the movie for taking me by surprise. While it was the movie that changed the ending, I believe that they changed it to make it more believable. This conflict in my head leads me to promise that I will not put my readers in that kind of predicament. At the same time, I will also make sure that my novel is not predictable, which is another form of torture to readers.

Chris Crutcher's *Deadline* (2007) is a novel about an 18 year old boy that has a terminal blood cancer and decides not to do anything about it. He also decides he does not want to tell anyone about his cancer. The novel follows him through his senior year in high school as he tries to learn everything he can about life and make the most of the rest of his time on Earth. My biggest complaint about this book is that there is way too much of a focus on football. He tries out for the team because he knows it can not get any worse but it takes up more of the novel than I think it should. I believe if I was not reading the novel for this project that I would have put the

novel down before finishing it. For that reason, I want to try to define my audience but not to cut people out at the same time. I felt excluded from the book by not knowing how to play football. In the end, I do not feel as if he accomplished anything by including the football in his story. However, I did learn one very important lesson by reading this book. The main character clearly had good days and bad days and it was apparent how they were different. Even for a person who will beat cancer, good days and bad days will happen and I think it will be really important for my main character to see her mother on both these kinds of days. I also learned that the character was a little older than I want my character to be. He and his family were worrying about college and his future but I do not really want my character focused on those things yet.

Lastly, John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) is about a girl, Hazel, with terminal thyroid cancer and a condition in her lungs that makes it hard for her to breathe. She is always on some sort of machine to pump oxygen into her lungs and the doctors have to periodically drain her lungs of fluid. In the novel, she goes to a support group for children (anyone under 18) with cancer where she meets Augustus Waters, who is in remission after fighting off a bone cancer that took his leg. Over the course of the novel, they fall in love and visit Amsterdam to meet their favorite writer, which turned out to be a huge disappointment, on the tab of the "Genies" (basically the fictional version of the Make a Wish Foundation). Augustus then tells Hazel his cancer has relapsed and passes away after they get home. For the most part, this novel was very realistic. There was a balance between the romance and the cancer and, at times, it would tip one way or the other but it seemed very natural. If the romance and cancer were equal throughout the whole book, it would be very awkward. However, the amount of romance and adulthood of it was a little more than I am going to want in my novel. In addition, this novel showed that cancer consumes the patient and family at times. Hazel lost touch with a lot of friends and activities

after she was diagnosed. She got her GED so she did not have to worry about school and that probably contributed. Mostly, she reads and watches America's Next Top Model with her mom. Her mom quit her job to take care of Hazel and Augustus stopped playing basketball. On the other hand, there was a huge unrealistic part of the novel that I just can not ignore because it bothered me the entire time I was reading. The whole trip to Amsterdam was just impossible. I do not see how the Genies would be ok with these two terminally ill cancer patients asking for a vacation in another country, especially since Hazel has to be constantly hooked up to some sort of oxygen. For this reason, I have to be careful about the degree to which I would like my novel to be realistic. In the end, I would like it to be a work of fiction but completely plausible.

3. Anastasia's Warrior

The basic synopsis for this novel is a teenage girl that is learning to deal with her mother that has just been diagnosed with breast cancer. Throughout the novel, the main character learns of her mother's cancer and has to go through the motions of "normal, teenage life" while trying to understand and deal with the potential loss of her mother. Aspects of teenage life that I am considering including are high school, depression, blooming sexuality, acting out, and insecurity. Other topics I wish to cover in my novel regarding my teenage character are dating for the first time and how her father reacts, a conflict among her friends, being able to confide in her friends, ending her relationship with her first boyfriend, a mother-daughter bonding moment or connection, and beginning to grow up as a result of her mom's cancer. In addition, I want to give her a positive outlet where she can focus her energy when she is feeling intense emotions about the boy or her mother. Since I have experience in music and singing, I decided to give her a vocal talent that she will revisit periodically.

Though I have never personally had cancer, or lost my mother to it, cancer is a huge part of a lot of people's lives, including mine. This is the reason that I have chosen cancer as the disease to focus on in my novel. I have lost more people in my family to cancer than I would like to admit and know others currently fighting it. The topic of cancer could bring many people to read my book, since almost everyone knows someone that has had cancer. Therefore, I need to accurately portray the sequence of the mother's breast cancer. In the entire novel, I will cover the initial, worrisome doctor's appointment; her diagnosis and discussing it with her child; the mother going through two surgeries, both a mastectomy (total removal of breast tissue) and reconstruction; the chemotherapy after surgery to make sure the cancer is completely gone; and finally getting a clean bill of health. As I said before, most of the novels I read in preparation for the writing portion of this project ended in death. However, that is not how many cancer patient stories end and I wanted to give a voice to survivors.

In choosing a title for this excerpt, I wanted to choose something simple but meaningful. This prompted me to name my character Anastasia. I borrowed the name off of an animated movie called Anastasia about a Russian princess that gets lost during a revolution, forgets everything, ends up in an orphanage, and then leaves when she is older to find her family. A character in the movie claims that her name in Russian means "she will rise again." The meaning he placed on the name conjures the image of someone who will never give up and will always be pursuing what they want out of the world. This is exactly the basis I wanted for my character. I also strategically chose the word warrior to describe her mother. I am active in raising funds for the American Cancer Society by participating in a fundraiser every year. I often interact with survivors and one of them gave me the idea of using the word warrior for cancer survivors. She says that cancer survivors are warriors because they fight a battle that not many people

understand and they come out a winner when the cancer is gone. But even after a survivor wins the battle, there are more hurdles to overcome as their lives continue. They have to have periodic checkups and blood tests and doctors do not take the risk of saying they are cured of their cancer until they have gone five years without a trace of cancer in their body. Many survivors have even more hurdles, if the cancer affected them enough. The woman that calls survivors warriors has her arm permanently wrapped because her cancer affected the lymph nodes in her arm in a negative way. Other survivors have to go on oxygen to help them breathe or various medications to stay cancer free. Survivors deal with more than I can ever imagine and the fact that they deal with these issues every day inspires me and made me want to represent them with this novel. As a result, this excerpt is titled “Anastasia’s Warrior.”

4. Issues and Solutions

My main concern with choosing the more serious topic of cancer is how to present it in a way that young people would understand. How I choose to frame the topic is very important to how successful my book will be. If I inaccurately portray this disease and someone is not happy with it, a negative view could spread faster than someone that thinks my book does a great job of covering a very serious topic. Also, I do not want to throw a ton of facts and long words at the reader and scare one off instead of encouraging him or her to read more. Another thing I want to be careful of is boring the audience. My question here is how to frame the disease in a new light and make the audience feel the emotion of the main character. Also, I question how I can present the medical facts in an accurate matter without being too scientific for the average reader.

When starting this project, I knew about cancer but I did not feel that I knew enough to sufficiently cover it in my novel. I wanted to learn more about the disease. What I did know about cancer is that it is not just the person diagnosed who is affected. Everyone around that

person is: family, friends, and even whole communities. My hope is that I will be able to portray this in the novel. I have chosen one of the most common cancers in America: breast cancer. In fact, according to the American Cancer Society, nearly 1 in 3 women diagnosed with cancer specifically have breast cancer. Therefore, it was not hard to find a number of sources to teach me about breast cancer, and more than just the clinical side of it. The books that I ended up learning the most from helped me plan her mother's journey with cancer. I wanted the cancer to be serious enough to explain why she would need surgery and chemotherapy, which is why I chose Stage II. In addition, there are still two more serious stages so that would make it believable that she survives. I also needed to plan what came after the removal of the cancer, which I had never considered before reading these books. I had to consider her options for reconstruction and the type of therapy she received following surgery. Overall, I am glad I chose this specific type of cancer. My family has a history of breast cancer in my aunt and my grandmother and it was proactive that I learned all of this about the disease now. However, I can not say if I accurately portrayed breast cancer through the eyes of my main character thus far. This knowledge will only surface from reactions to the work of fiction.

From what I have read in books dealing with cancer, there is a significant lack of women present. This could be a flaw I created by choosing the books that I did. However, I can not read the entirety of young adult fiction books with cancer as a prominent or mentioned theme. For example, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is written by a man, about a young man who lost his brother to cancer prior to the novel's opening. Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* has a similar situation; it was written by a man, about a boy who lost his mother, but his mother was never present and not mentioned a lot in the text. In contrast, I am a woman writing about a girl who is dealing with a mother with cancer. In my opinion, women are very important in the

literature world. Women and girls feel the effects of everyday life very differently than men. In addition to that, it would be disingenuous for me to try to write from the perspective of a male because I have never experienced being a male myself. I would not know how a male thinks or feels differently than the way I would feel in a situation. It would be much easier to imagine how I would react to, for example, my mother being diagnosed with cancer. I am also actively attempting to balance the amount of male and female characters in the text. As a result, the family is made up of a mother, father, brother, and sister. In the case of this text, I chose such a normal family structure because I feel it would have been too much conflict to give the protagonist something else to worry about. I considered making her an only child, but I decided that the little brother would turn out to benefit the text in some way. However, at the current stage of the work, I am not sure what that benefit will be. In addition to the family, I added two female friends, the protagonist's male crush, and her male voice teacher.

While writing, I realized that I could obviously not cover everything I wanted to cover in the novel in the excerpt for this project. For the purpose of the excerpt, I have left out many of the scenes between a few phases of her mother's journey with cancer so as to focus on the mother-daughter relationship. This resulted in a few awkward transitions so as to give the reader an accurate timeline that he or she can understand and believe. In the final draft of the novel, these awkward transitions will be non-existent because I will bridge those gaps and explore what happens between the major plot points I initially chose to cover. The first day in the novel is somewhat complete at this point. I chose to complete it this way to show the reader what the rest of the novel will feel like and look like. I hope this reassures the reader that the protagonist does have a life outside of her mother's illness. She will be a normal teenager making somewhat bad decisions and performing acts that she probably should not be doing.

Anastasia's Warrior

An Excerpt of a Novel by Elizabeth Cramer

I was staring into the mirror in my bedroom, mascara wand in hand and mouth wide open, when my mother called up the stairs to me.

“Anastasia, please come down here! You’re going to miss your bus!”

I rolled my eyes at myself in the mirror and did a last once over. As always, I looked fine, but I could never get the eyeliner just right or pick out the clothes to perfectly accent the curves I am so proud of. I grabbed my backpack off of my bed and whirled out of the room and down the stairs.

“I told you I was coming,” I said. Just then, I looked out the front window and saw the bus turning the corner onto our street. Perfect timing. “And I told you I would make this bus,” I said to my mother, whirling out the door as she sighed in exasperation.

Then, mom called after me from the doorway, “Don’t miss the bus home either! I have a doctor’s appointment downtown at 3! And I don’t want your brother home alone!”

“Okay, mom!” I shouted back, waving her inside as the bus stopped in front of me. Imagine if my friends on the bus saw my mom in her bathrobe. Geez!

I climbed aboard and headed to my usual seat in the middle of the bus. Sit too far forward and you’re a nerd. Sit too far back and you’re a troublemaker. Sit somewhere in the middle and you decide who you’re seen as.

“Oh my god, Ana. Was your mom about to come outside in her bathrobe?” My friend Sophie looked at me across the aisle with sympathy in her eyes.

“I was trying to avoid that,” I said, rolling my eyes and taking the Cosmopolitan magazine I wasn’t supposed to have out of my backpack. My mom thinks it is all about sex but there are actually some pretty informational articles in there. I never would have known about

the different types of birth control if I hadn't started buying it at the grocery store with my friends. "Wanna see what our bedroom persona is?" I asked her.

Sophie practically leaped over the aisle, much to the bus driver's dismay. She landed on the bench seat beside me in a huff and we called out an apology to the driver. We try not to annoy her because she's such an awesome bus driver but sometimes we just can't help it.

Sophie took out a pen and we marked in our answers next to the questions on the glossy pages. "When you are in the club, how do you find yourself dancing?" I read aloud. "A- center of attention and pulling off redonkulous moves. B- standing in a corner bobbing your head slightly to the beat. C. Surrounded by a group of friends, feeding off each other's energy. Or D- totally goofy, doing the sprinkler and the wave?"

"Oh, I am totally a C," Sophie said marking an S next to the letter.

"I don't even know how to answer this question. We're only sixteen! We've never been in a club!" I looked at her, confused as to how she came up with her answer.

"Well, think of the dances we went to in middle school. It wasn't that long ago. Two years feels long but high school feels longer," Sophie said.

"Tell me about it." I roll my eyes. "I can't wait to turn eighteen, get out of my house and go to a completely different state for college. Then my mom can't possibly ask me to live at home."

"You're gonna leave me?" Sophie pouted at me.

"No way! You're coming with me and we're gonna be roommates!" I look at her with excitement. We've been planning this since the beginning of Freshmen year and the guidance counselors were all on our butts to join a million extra-curriculars so our applications to colleges would look better.

“Hell yeah, we are!” Sophie cried out, louder than she planned.

“Language!” the bus driver called back.

“Sorry!” we said in unison.

“Anyway, going back to middle school, I guess I’m a B,” I said.

“I am not marking that down,” Sophie said. “First of all, you were never like that. Second of all, how could you leave me hanging!”

Just then, our friend Marie plopped down across the aisle and leaned over to see what we were doing. “Hey guys. What did I miss?”

“We’re taking a Cosmo quiz and Ana over here is insisting that she dances by bobbing her head slightly to the beat in a corner,” Sophie told her.

Marie laughed. “No freaking way. What are the other options? That can’t be the best one.”

Sophie and Marie continue to decide my bedroom persona for me while I sat back and smiled. They are two of the best friends I could ask for. They have kept me from flying totally off the handle so many times.

“Oh my god, guys. Be quiet. We’re at his stop,” I whispered, peering out the window innocently.

And there he was. One of the new kids this year, Brad was standing at the corner. He brushed his brown hair out of his eyes as he waited for the bus to open its doors for the last stop before we got to the school. “Guys, he is so cute,” I said quietly, not willing to take my eyes off him.

Sophie and Marie started giggling uncontrollably so I finally turned around and gave them the look that told them I meant business.

“Alright, alright,” Marie said, backing out of the aisle and sitting up straight. “We’ll play it cool.”

He got on the bus and started heading toward the back. He caught my eye and smiled. I looked away quickly, not realizing beforehand that I was staring. He sat down three rows back and Sophie and Marie cracked up a little. I gave them a look and they stopped. Marie made the zipping motion across her lips and Sophie followed suit.

Soon, we pulled up to the school and started piling out. I was first off of the bus of the three of us so as soon as I descended the stairs, I stepped off to the side to wait for them. Sophie was right behind me but we waited on Marie. Brad jumped down the stairs, Marie right behind him. Then, Brad turned to me and his green eyes seemed to peer into my soul.

“I think you dropped this,” he said to me in the most gorgeous baritone I had ever heard. He handed me the very pen we were using to take the quiz in the magazine.

My heart was in my throat but I managed to choke out, “thanks! I’ll need this later.”

He smiled and walked away, meeting up with a couple of his friends at the entrance to the school.

“Oh my god. He talked to you!” Sophie squealed, dancing around on her tippy toes.

I grabbed one of her arms and one of Marie’s, still staring after him. “Did that really just happen?”

“You bet your sweet ass it did!” Sophie said. She and Marie erupted into giggles and I just stood there with a goofy smile on my face.

* * *

Later that day, I was scheduled to have a voice lesson with my favorite choir teacher I’ve ever had. Oddly enough, that practice room was where I felt the most confident in myself. I

could hear my voice resonate and then fade away, gaining strength as I warmed up. I liked to show up early to practice before my teacher got there so I could give him my best.

Five minutes later, the slightly balding and gray haired man knocked and stepped into the room. “Hey, Ana. How are you doing today?” he said, as always.

“Great. Ready to go,” I said. He navigated around my stand in the tiny room to sit at the bench in front of the upright piano, which was pushed into the corner furthest from the door.

“Good to hear. Do you want to start talking about your audition piece for the musical?” He shuffled a few folders and books of music.

“Musical tryouts aren’t for another month,” I said, not expecting that suggestion at all.

“I know,” he said. “But I picked the perfect musical for you and I want you to go out for the lead.” Prior to this, I had never been the lead. In middle school, there was always someone better and last year I was in the chorus. To go from chorus to lead in one year would be astounding.

“So, you are going to help me get the lead?” I asked, sort of suspicious.

“Well, I can’t guarantee you the lead; that would be favoritism. But, you would be excellent in this role and I want to show the other judges at auditions what I am seeing in this practice room every week,” he said. Glancing through the music, he pulled a book out and held it up. “What about Defying Gravity from Wicked?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t hit those notes. And since when is a lead in a musical ever an alto?” I was still confused about all of this.

“You’ll see,” he said.

We continued to look through his library of audition songs he brought, occasionally singing through them. We narrowed it down to a couple of songs but our time was up.

“Think about it for next week, ok?” he said.

“Alright,” I said. “See you in choir.”

I grabbed my stuff and opened the door into the band room. For some reason, the only practice rooms we had in the high school were off the band room. I closed the door behind me and turned to walk back to my free period when I heard my name.

“Hey, Ana.”

I looked towards the source and found it to be none other than Brad. He is one of those amazingly musical kids that does band and choir. I never had a talent for an instrument but he seemed to play trombone pretty well. My heart did this fluttering thing but I managed to pull off a smile and a “Hey, Brad.”

“You sounded good in there,” he said, joining me as I walked towards the door. “What are you working on?”

“Oh, this and that. Trying to find a song for musical tryouts,” I said, clutching my books tighter and pushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Already?” he asked. “Damn, I better get a move on then.”

I laughed nervously. “Yeah. I wonder what it will be.”

We came to the end of the music hallway and he said, “well, I’m going this way so I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah. See you later,” I said, almost completely in shock. I needed to find Marie and Sophie fast. I had to tell them about this.

* * *

I hopped off the last step of the bus and, when I was safely on the driveway, turned around to wave to Marie. The bus pulled away and I headed up the driveway to the door. “Mom

is usually home by now,” I mumbled to myself. I set my backpack down on the porch and rooted around in the small pocket for the key mom made me carry just in case.

I opened the door and walked in, suddenly wary about an empty house. I dropped my backpack on the floor next to the kitchen table and wandered to the fridge to grab a drink. I was standing there polishing off the last of the orange juice out of the carton when I saw today’s date on the calendar and “3pm- Doctor’s Appointment” written on it. That’s right! I totally forgot! I was so focused on my mom not being seen by half the school in her bathrobe that I forgot what she told me this morning. I looked at the clock, 3:15. Well, she probably won’t be too much longer. I guess I’ll be good and do my homework so she’ll be proud when she walks in and sees me.

An hour later, I was still hunkered over my homework at the kitchen table when my little brother, Issac, walked through the door. He is in seventh grade this year so he feels like he’s becoming the man of the house.

“What’s up, Ana? Where’s mom?” He reached over me and grabbed a handful of the popcorn I made 20 minutes earlier.

“Hey! Get your own!” I swatted his hand away, worried about my snack first. “Mom’s at a doctor’s appointment. I don’t know what the heck is taking so long though. It started at 3.”

“Hm,” Issac said, looking puzzled as he tossed piece after piece of my popcorn in his mouth.

“Will you just sit down and do your homework?” I told him, pushing him away slightly so he would sit down at the other side of the table.

“Is there any orange juice left?” he asked, walking towards the fridge.

“Are you blind? It’s right there on the counter. I just finished it.”

Issac sighed this huge sigh and stared into the fridge looking for something to shove into his fast growing body. Geez. He has the metabolism of a...oh wait. He is thirteen...

Just then, we heard the garage door. "Quick, Issac! Sit down! Look like you've been doing your homework!"

He dived for the table and his backpack, threw a page of math on the table, and pulled off a concentrated look with a pencil in hand all before mom opened the door. I taught him well.

I finished a problem I had been staring at for five minutes before Issac came in the door and looked up to find, not only my mom coming in the door, but dad as well.

"Good timing or something?" I asked them.

"Not exactly," dad said. "I had to pick mom up from her doctor's appointment."

"Oh. Is the car ok?" I said because I was hoping dad would be taking me out to teach me how to drive again tonight.

"The car's fine," he said, giving mom a sideways look. "Honey, do you want to go lay down?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I think I'll just start dinner."

"No way," dad said. "You go lay down. I got dinner tonight."

"Mom? Are you ok?" I said, Issac's face mirroring my own concern.

"Leave your mother alone, kids," dad said before she could even open her mouth.

"Honey, go get some rest. I'll come get you for dinner."

Mom walked toward the stairs and I turned to dad with a confused look on my face.

"Let's just..." he trailed off. "Don't ask questions just yet. We don't want to jump to any conclusions."

"Is she sick?" Issac asked.

“Let’s just stay calm. Everything is fine. She’s just tired right now.”

Issac and I exchanged a look. Something was going on and I had a feeling they weren’t going to tell us until they were ready.

* * *

A week after mom’s doctor appointment, mom and dad called a family meeting. We sat at the kitchen table, recently cleared from dinner. Issac and I looked back and forth from mom to dad. Dad cleared his throat after a minute of silence and a tear dropped down mom’s face.

“Mom? What’s going on? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, baby. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” mom said and put her head in her hands.

“Will someone please tell me why we needed a family meeting?” Issac asked.

“Well kids,” dad started.

“No,” mom said, lifting her head from her hands, tears still falling down her cheeks. “I’ll tell them.”

Issac and I looked at her, thinking the worst. Maybe we can’t go on vacation in the summer anymore! Or we have to go to Grandma’s for Christmas. Ugh.

“Kids, remember that doctor’s appointment I had last week?” she said. We both nodded.

“Well, I had to be picked up because I was feeling a little light headed over what happened.”

Issac and I looked at each other, confused, then looked back, waiting for more information.

“The doctor wanted to investigate a lump I found in my breast. After a mammogram, he decided to take a biopsy of some of the tissue in my breast.”

I was confused. “They cut into you?”

“No, baby. It was a needle. They took samples from inside my breast and looked at it under a microscope.” Her voice broke and she started crying harder now.

“Honey,” dad said.

“No, no. I want to tell them,” she assured him, still crying and choking on the words. “Kids, they found cancer in the sample. I have breast cancer.” With that, she let out a sob and covered her face with her hands. I could see her whole body shaking but she was crying so hard that no sound came out. I immediately got up and put my arms around her. Soon, I felt Issac wrapping his arms around the other side of mom. Dad followed too, wrapping his arms around all three of us, tears streaming down his face quietly.

* * *

About an hour later, mom went to lie down in their bed and dad went to the kitchen to conquer the dishes from dinner. Issac was in the living room watching TV so I walked into the kitchen and started drying and putting away the dishes my dad washed.

“So what happens next?” I asked him.

“Well, the doctor wants to make a plan of action as soon as possible so it doesn’t spread to other parts of her body. I think we’re going to have to do some kind of surgery. Possibly chemotherapy. I guess we’ll find out when mom goes back to the doctor tomorrow. She was in so much shock, there wasn’t much we could do but bring her home.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes pumpkin?”

“Is mom going to die?” I asked him, afraid of the answer but knowing I needed to ask it.

“I don’t think so, honey,” he said. “It’s only Stage II invasive cancer. That means they caught it early enough that they should be able to treat her successfully and she should have a

full recovery. So we need to stay strong for her. Keep her spirits up. This is just a bump in the road, not a five feet deep pot hole.”

I looked down, the tears and the reality of the situation hitting me. I heard the water stop running and, after quickly wiping his hands on the towel, dad enveloped me in the biggest, warmest hug I had ever gotten from him. I felt his tears moisten the top of my head where his cheek lay and we stood there in the kitchen, arms around each other, for a long time.

* * *

Later that night, before I went to bed, I sat at my desk in my room and opened my laptop. My eyes watched as my fingers moved over the touch pad as if they were foreign to my body. I found myself typing “Stage II invasive breast cancer” into the search bar and pressing enter. Suddenly, my eyes knew what my fingers wanted to tell my brain.

I poured over medical websites, gathering as much information as I could. But it only meant so much to me. At some point, my brain stopped understanding the new terms that were bombarding me. I understood what Stage II meant. It means my mom has a greater chance of surviving five years after diagnosis than Stage IV patients. I found invasive cancer. It sounds horrible, like the cancer is invading my mom’s body. But it doesn’t mean her whole body, just her breast. They would have found more if it got into her bloodstream or lymph nodes.

Even though I was pouring over the same information, I continued to click and scroll through all the sites. Eventually, I stumbled across a website that some cancer survivors had started. It was a forum for people to share their stories. Like my fingers still had a mind of their own, I composed my own post. I told them about my mother being diagnosed with Stage II invasive breast cancer. I told them I was scared. I told them I don’t want to lose my mother when I still have so much to learn from her. I posted it before my brain caught up to me. When it

finally did, I looked down at my hands in horror then reread my post. It was all true, but I never talk to strangers like this. How did I know this site can be trusted? For all I knew, I downloaded a virus by posting that. My dad would kill me if that happened. For all I knew, there were predators on this site. Mom would kill me if that happened.

A ding forced my eyes back to the screen. Someone had replied to my post:

“Cancer is a scary word, sweetie. No one wants to hear it. But I had the same cancer you are telling me your mom has. And I am 3 years in remission. Your mom will live through this and you will still get to learn from her. The doctors know more now than they did even when I was diagnosed. She’ll be fine. She’s in good hands.”

A tear rolled down my cheek and another ding of a response drew my eyes further down.

“I totally agree. I’ll be praying for your entire family, angel.”

The responses kept coming. Finally, I had to shut down my laptop and go to bed. The encouraging words from online strangers soothed me and I saw them on the back of my eye lids. They danced and swirled until, finally, I fell asleep.

* * *

That Friday, the whole school was alive as usual because of the weekend. I was just glad to have a chance to be home for the weekend. Mom and I made plans to binge watch Disney movies as long as I get my homework done.

After the bell ending eighth period, I joined the throngs pushing toward their lockers and then out to the buses. I was arranging my backpack with my weekend homework books when I felt a tap on my shoulder. Brad swiveled around in the crowd so he could lean against the lockers next to mine.

“Hey, Ana,” he said, smiling sort of shyly at me. That was the first time I’ve ever seen a hint of nervousness in that face.

“Hi, Brad,” I said nervously, still trying to pack up my backpack so I didn’t miss the bus.

He took a deep breath. “So, what did I miss in choir today? Before I knew what was happening, the band teacher claimed us doubled up kids as his own during first period. He claimed we owe it to him since we just started concert band music.” He rolled his eyes at that but gave me another smile to show that we both knew where he really wanted to be.

“Well, not much really. He just went over a whole new song that you band kids know nothing about,” I said, teasing him. I finally slung my backpack over my shoulder and closed my locker. I started to walk toward the bus loop and Brad was right there, walking with me, his own backpack hanging off of his shoulder.

“I guess I’ll just have to kidnap you and make you teach it to me,” he said.

“A lot of good that will do you,” I said, sarcastically. “We are totally different parts.”

“So it’s a parts song. Good to know,” he said. We laughed a little.

“Don’t worry, Brad. He said he would go over it again next week. It’s kind of hard anyway so I’ll be glad for the refresh.”

“Still, you have the upper hand,” he said. “I may have to follow through on that kidnap plan.”

“Why would you tell me if you were going to kidnap me?” I asked.

“Because you don’t know when it’s coming. I’ll still catch you off guard,” he said.

I laughed. “Alright. I’ll pack a bag as soon as I get home. Don’t want to get caught kidnapped without a toothbrush.”

Now we were at the bus loop and we started walking along the line up, scanning for our bus. “How about we just go on a date instead?” he asked.

“A date?” I asked. I was so shocked I stopped in my tracks. The buses gave their one minute warning beeps and Brad grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the bus. He led me to the back, past Sophie and Marie’s questioning but excited eyes. I gave them a shrug as if to say “I don’t know but I’ll call you later.” Brad sat down on the inside of a seat and pulled me down next to him on the aisle.

“Yes,” he said. “A date. I, Brad, want to take you, Ana, on a date.”

“Are you, like, totally old fashioned or something? Most guys would ask for my number first, right?” I asked.

“Should I? I’ve never wanted to actually seriously date a girl before,” he said.

“Well, I’ve never been seriously asked out before. So, I’m new at this too,” I said.

“Can I have both?” he asked.

“Both what?” I asked, completely confused by this conversation.

“Your number and a date?”

He looked so hopeful, my heart kind of melted a little bit. I mean, he was good-looking and nice enough, right? Maybe I should just go for it. I’ve been admiring from afar for too long. Why not go on a date?

“Um, yeah. You can have both.” I grabbed his cell phone out of his hands and added my cell phone number into his contacts. “Call me and we can arrange the date.”

He took his phone back and looked at the number I gave him. He smiled a little. It was so cute, watching a guy get happy at the prospect of dating me.

“I gotta go now,” I said, noticing my stop was almost up.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll call you.”

I got up and walked down the aisle slowly, wanting to avoid every wobble that was threatening to take over my knees. I got off the bus and walked up to the house, still concentrating on my every move. Once I was safely on the other side of the door, I dropped my backpack on the floor and started doing a happy dance.

“Ana? Is that you?” Mom was calling from upstairs. She was still a little sore from the biopsy so she spent a lot of time sitting in bed. I hoped I didn’t wake her from a nap. I climbed the stairs as fast as I could and walked into her room since the door was halfway open.

“Hi, Ana. How was your day?”

I smiled hugely at her, so much so that she caught the smile and looked at me closer.

“What?” she asked. “What’s going on? It’s something good, I can tell.”

“Remember the new kid? Brad?” I asked her.

“Yes. His parents were so nice when I met them. And he was so cute,” she said. “What about him?”

“He asked me out on a date,” I said.

Her eyes went huge but she looked happy. “Oh my god!”

“I know,” I said.

“Oh my god, my baby is growing up!” she said, reaching out her good arm to hug me.

“I know,” I repeated, accepting the hug.

“Your first date!” she said.

“I know,” I said again.

* * *

“Absolutely not,” dad said, getting up from his perch on the bed next to my mother as I stood facing them. He had just gotten home ten minutes ago but mom had already blurted it out to him. He started pacing with his arms crossed over his chest. He did not look happy.

“Dad, I’m sixteen,” I said. “How long do you expect me to wait till I start dating?”

“Forever?” he said like that was a dumb question.

“Dad, for real?” I said. “Come on! I’m old enough!”

“Says you,” he said, still pacing.

“Honey, just let her go,” mom said, looking at dad.

“What? Just let her go?” he said, looking as if mom betrayed him.

“Yes,” she said. “I don’t see the harm in it. We started going out when we were fifteen. I’m surprised she waited this long.”

“We have nothing to do with this,” dad said. “We were different.”

“Not really, honey. We have to let her go,” mom said.

Dad looked a little angry still but sat down on the bed again. “Fine,” he said, looking at the floor. “But I want hourly texts on where you are and what you are doing.” He looked at me with his discipline face on.

“What if we go to a movie?” I asked.

“Before and after,” he said, not backing down.

“Fine,” I said. With that, I left the room and went to my own. In my dad’s eyes, he just won. But in my eyes, I totally won.

* * *

At precisely seven that night, my phone buzzed. I was in my room on my laptop again so I answered it without hesitation.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hey,” Brad’s baritone sounded different over the phone. But a good different.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s up?” I was trying to act nonchalant but my hands were shaking and I could hardly get a full breath.

“I was just wondering if you are going to be free tomorrow for our date,” he said.

“So soon?” I asked.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “I don’t want to wait till next weekend. Do you?”

“No,” I said, smiling.

“Then I’ll pick you up tomorrow at five.”

“Well, what do you have in mind? What if I say no?” I was teasing him but I only felt a little bad about it.

“I was thinking traditional. Dinner and a movie sound ok to you?” he said.

* * *

By five the next day, I was a nervous wreck. My hands were sweating, I had to put double the normal amount of deodorant on, and my mom kept catching me smiling. She was excited for me. She even helped pick out my outfit. In the end, we went with a simple pair of dark wash jeans, a cute tank top, and a cardigan. I asked her if it seemed too old for me but she insisted I looked beautiful.

Brad picked me up from my house in his dad’s car, which I only knew because he told me. As we drove to the restaurant, we tried to make conversation.

“You look great,” he said, for about the tenth time since I answered the door.

“Thanks,” I said. “You look pretty great too.” He was also wearing jeans but he was sporting a t-shirt and leather jacket on top.

“This old thing?” he said and he chuckled a little bit while I giggled and stared at my feet.

He took me to a sit-down restaurant but not anything super fancy that would cost fifty dollars for a meal. I appreciated that. I was not dressed for a fifty-dollars-a-plate kind of restaurant. Conversation continued sort of haltingly throughout dinner. We would find a topic, talk for a few minutes, then stumble around looking for a new topic. Usually, that consisted of complimenting whatever we were eating or drinking. We talked about our families, me totally avoiding the issue with mom.

“Dad works with computer software and mom is a nurse,” I said. “I also have a little brother, Issac. He’s still in middle school but he is growing fast.”

“Just mom and dad for me,” he said. “Dad’s a doctor and mom mostly works part time stuff just because she doesn’t like to be bored.”

After dinner, he drove us to the movie theater and we discussed what movie to see. As luck would have it, an action/romance movie that we were both interested in was about to start. We bought tickets then settled down in the theater. I was suddenly very aware of how close we were. Just before the movie started, Brad put his open hand on the armrest with a smile. I smiled back and took it.

I couldn’t tell you one single thing about that movie. Well, maybe the title, but other than that I was too nervous to pay attention. I have never held a guy’s hand before. It was so warm. His fingers were thicker than mine but in a comforting way. Kind of like it was protective.

After the movie, we held hands as we walked back to the car. He opened the passenger door for me and I smiled at him shyly as I got in. We got to my house and I unbuckled my seat belt.

“Want me to walk you to the door?” he asked, unbuckling his seat belt too.

“No, it’s ok,” I said.

“Too late,” he said and he got out of the car and opened my door for me. He gently grabbed my hand as we walked to the door.

“Well...” I said, expecting him to want to kiss me.

“Well, good night,” he said. He kissed my cheek, which was not the kind of kiss I expected, then walked to his car. Once I was safely in the house, he drove away, the taillights staying visible out the window next to the front door until he turned the corner off of my street.

* * *

The Wednesday after my date with Brad, I sat in the waiting room with my dad and Issac. I had a book in front of me, pretending to read for English but my mind would not process the words on the page in front of me. How could I when somewhere beyond those doors, through the maze of hallways, my mother was getting a piece of her body removed. What a weird place to be on a Wednesday. And it felt like the surgery was taking forever. Is something wrong? How is she going to look? Will she be able to lift her arms? How long will we have to take care of her?

My stream of questions was interrupted by a doctor walking through the swinging doors with a clipboard in his hands. I saw many hopeful families turn their heads but his eyes found mine huddled in the corner. He walked over and my dad immediately stood up and shook his hand. I guess that’s a guy thing. I kind of think shaking hands is a gross gesture. Especially when this particular person was just cutting into my mom.

“Well, sir, your wife did amazing in the first surgery. I believe we got all of the cancer, so after a little bit of additional treatment, we should be able to declare her cancer free,” the doctor said.

My dad looked at him like he could cry and hug the doctor all at once. Instead, he grabbed my hand. But I was confused. “First surgery? What do you mean?”

“Why don’t we move into a family consultation room where we can discuss the situation in depth,” the doctor said to me.

“I don’t need to talk to you. I just want to see my mom!” I yanked my hand free from Dad’s and took a defiant stance. There was no way I was going anywhere with this doctor unless it was to see my mom.

“Ana, honey, let’s just go with the doctor. He can explain everything,” Dad said, trying to grab my hand again.

“You know what?” the doctor said. “Let’s go take you guys to see her first. She’s a little groggy from the anesthesia but she should be awake enough to have a ten minute visit. We can talk after.”

The tear that was threatening to spill out on my cheek held still for a moment and when I saw the doctor leading my dad and little brother through the swinging doors and into that maze, I wiped it away and followed them. I had to stay strong for Mom.

We walked into the recovery room and there were family members and nurses everywhere. Finally, we got to my mom’s curtained off section. It was small, only big enough for her bed, the IV stand she was hooked up to, and two chairs on one side of the bed. I saw her lying in that big, white bed and she looked so small. My mom has never seemed small to me. She has always been taller than me, looking down to offer advice or leaning down to kiss my cheek. But there, in that hospital room, she was not my superhero mom. She looked more like someone had found her kryptonite.

“Mom?” Issac said, probably as shocked as me.

“Issac? Baby? Is that you?” she said hoarsely.

Issac walked bravely up to the bed and grabbed her hand. For a middle schooler, he had way more courage than me. I finally got up the guts to speak. “Mom, are you ok?”

“Ana...oh... I’ve definitely been better,” she said, closing her eyes as she said this and I saw her left hand jerk a little bit. That’s when I noticed the button attached by wire to something behind the bed I couldn’t see.

“Dad? What’s that button for?” I asked.

“It’s for the pain killers,” the doctor interjected. “If she starts to feel horrible pain, she can press it. But don’t worry, it is set so it won’t give her more than she really needs.”

My eyes welled up as he said that. Mom? My mom is in pain? My mom doesn’t have pain. She hardly ever gets sick. I can’t even remember the last time she had a cold or complained about a headache. How could she have gotten this poison in her that caused her this pain in the first place? Where did this cancer even come from? Why haven’t doctors found a better way to treat it than slicing someone open? Where is the pill you take that gets rid of your cancer in seconds? And how can this disease take over someone’s body so fully? How can it take my strong, superhero mother and turn her into this tiny person on a hospital bed pushing a button to make the pain go away?

Before the tears could spill for real this time, I spun around and ran out of that tiny curtained area. I didn’t care where I went. So long as I didn’t have to watch my mother push that button ever again.

* * *

Mom spent another day in the hospital, the rest of us filtering in and out of the room to say hi and offer encouraging words in between school and everything else. I could tell she was

still in pain because she didn't lift either arm the entire time we were there. Of course, that could have something to do with my dad being on top of her every move. Every time she would even start to say "water, please," he was already there with the cup, holding the straw steady so she wouldn't have to reach for it. And every time she was done, she would look at dad with the most pure look of gratitude in her eyes before the pain returned. I've never seen dad so attentive. It was kind of refreshing, seeing they were still in love after all this time.

On Friday, dad picked her up from the hospital in the morning, after Issac and I had already got on our respective buses for school. By the time I got home, I was ready to see my mom. I raced away from the bus, not even bothering to wave to Marie as I usually did. It's ok though. She knew what was going on. She was probably sitting on the inside of the seat still, face pressed against the bus window trying to see in the house.

I threw open the door so hard it banged against the wall of the entryway. "Dad? Mom?" I called, thinking they would be upstairs. My dad appeared from around the corner with a finger to his mouth. I quickly drew my fingers over my lips in a zipped motion and closed the door quietly. Dad motioned towards the study, where he sat in his computer chair and I sat on the couch. "Dad, what's going on?" I asked. "Isn't mom here?"

"Exactly," he said. "I set up the futon in the living room so she wouldn't have to climb the stairs right away. She was still really groggy from all the pain meds. If I'm going to move her upstairs, I want a couple spotters to catch her just in case my grip slips. I couldn't live with myself if I caused more harm at this point."

"Ok. So she's sleeping and that's why you shushed me?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm hoping she'll wake up for dinner and we can all have a family movie night or something after."

“A funny movie please? I don’t want to see her sad like she was in the hospital anymore,” I said.

“Deal,” dad said. “We could all use a little bit of happiness around here.”

* * *

On Saturday, Brad called me. I was watching another movie with my family so I snuck out of the room and told him to hold on till I got to my room and shut the door.

“I was hoping we could go out on another date this weekend,” he said. “I was going to ask you earlier but I didn’t see much of you in school this week. Is everything ok?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What’s wrong? Is it me? Did you not have a good time on our date last week? Should I have texted you more? Called you more?”

“No, Brad,” I said. “You were fine. Great, really. I had so much fun on the date. It was nice to get out of the house for once and you made pretty good company.”

“So, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t think we should go out again. At least, not for a while. I don’t know if I’m ready and I have this family stuff going on right now. I just need to deal with it first and then maybe we can try again,” I said.

“Family stuff? Do you really not like me that much?”

“No! That’s not what I mean. I like you. A lot. I’m just not ready right now,” I said.

“Well, maybe we should try being friends first before we start dating again,” he said.

“I think that’s a great idea.”

“So, as a friend, family stuff?” he asked.

“That really was true. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come out like that.”

“It’s ok. But, you know, as a friend, you can tell me anything,” he said.

“You want the truth? Right now? Even though we just started being friends?” I asked.

“Yes. I would love that,” he said.

“Well, my mom has cancer. Breast cancer to be exact,” I said.

“Wait, really?” he asked.

“Yeah. She was diagnosed a couple days before we went on our date and she had surgery on Wednesday this week.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“Well, as a friend, you don’t really tell a guy you’re going out with for the first time after having a crush on him since school started ‘hey, thanks for asking me out. By the way, my mom has cancer.’ Right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. That is kind of weird,” he said.

“Exactly. But now, as a friend, I feel like I can tell you.”

“Wow. I’ve been going about this the exact wrong way,” he said.

“You think we should have been friends first?” I asked.

“Well, we kinda were. But now that I have your number, we really can be,” he said.

“I guess that’s true,” I said with a smile.

“So, are you ok?” he asked.

“Not really,” I said. “It’s going to be a long journey and I think we’re going to be ok. Just, getting to the ok is really hard.”

“I’m always here for you. Call me any time,” he said.

“I might take you up on that,” I said with a giggle.

* * *

The next day, dad went to get something for dinner and I was alone with mom. We were in my parents' room. We had helped her move upstairs to her bed on Saturday. The futon was not proving to be very helpful in speeding up her recovery. I was reading and she was sleeping. Or, I thought she was.

"Ana? Whatever happened with Brad?" she asked.

"You're awake?" I asked. "Are you ok? Do you need pain meds?"

She turned her body toward me. "Ana, I'm fine. I just want to talk before your father comes home. Is everything ok?"

"Yeah. We decided we just wanted to be friends," I said.

"Oh, Ana," she said, taking my hand in hers. "You're not ok, are you?"

I looked down into my lap. "Kind of."

"Baby, it's ok," mom said.

"I just..." I started. "It was my first date. I wanted everything to be perfect. And it was. He even kissed my cheek at the end. He didn't even try to go for my mouth and I think that was totally respectful. I just... Ugh."

"Ugh is right," mom said. "He sounds perfect. So what happened?"

"Mom, really?"

"Just tell me," she said.

"Mom, I can't just be happy and have this wonderful thing going on when you are in so much pain! I want to be here for you. I don't want to be running all over town with a boy I can't introduce you to."

"Ana," she said, a tear rolling down one cheek. "Is that really how you feel?"

"Yes!" I said.

“You know I want nothing more than for you to be happy,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Just not right now.”

“Is he going to wait for you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, wiping the few tears of my own away. “He wants to stay friends while you get treatment too. He wants to be there for me.”

“That’s sweet,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “God! Why does he have to be so amazing?” I dropped my head in my hands, then felt my mom rubbing my back.

“That’s just how it is sometimes, honey,” mom said. “Sometimes, you meet the right guy at the wrong time.”

* * *

On Monday, Issac and I had a day off of school for a teachers’ conference day. I was sitting in the living room doing homework I had procrastinated on when dad came down with a worried look on his face.

“What’s wrong, dad? Is mom ok?” I asked him.

“Mom’s fine,” he said. “My boss just called me though. I have to go in to work. He said it’s important.”

“What could be so urgent at a company that creates computer software?” I asked.

“Apparently, they’ve had every guy look at this work in progress. No one can figure out what is wrong with it but it isn’t working right. And it has to be done by five or we lose a big client,” he said.

“Well, why are you so worried? Aren’t you the master of finding these problems that everyone always overlooks?”

“I don’t want to leave her like this,” he said. I realized he was talking about mom.

“I can take care of her,” I assured.

“And Issac? Are you sure?”

“Dad, I’m sixteen years old. It’s time you start treating me like it. If anything, Issac will help me.”

“You’re positive,” he said.

“One hundred percent. Go worry about work for a while instead of mom. I promise I will call you if anything changes,” I said.

“Ok,” he said. “Ok. Then, I have to go.” He turned to go get his jacket and shoes on but then turned around again. “Sweetie, thank you.”

“No problem,” I said.

“I already emptied her drain from the surgery. And don’t give her pain meds too close together. I don’t want her to get addicted.”

“Dad, I know. I’ve been watching you take care of her all weekend,” I said. I waved him away and he left shortly after, calling out an “I love you” as he shut the door. I put my books aside and went upstairs. First, I knocked on Issac’s open door and walked in. He was sitting on his bed with a comic book in his lap.

“Hey,” I said. “Just checking in ‘cause dad said I’m in charge till he gets home from work.”

“I’m fine,” he said, not looking up and turning a page in his book.

“Ok. Just let me know when you get hungry for lunch. I’m gonna go sit with mom a while.”

I walked away when I got a nod in response and lightly tapped on my parents' bedroom door. "Mom?"

"Hi sweetie," she said quietly. "Did dad go to work?"

"Yeah," I said, shutting the door halfway again after moving into the room. The curtains were still drawn so she could sleep but she was awake in the bed. The darkness and shadows moved in ways I was not used to so it took me a minute for my eyes to adjust. "Do you need anything?"

Mom chuckled lightly, then winced. "You know, your father asked me that before he left."

"I know," I said. I moved around the bed that took up the majority of the room to the opposite side of her and sat down lightly. "I was hoping, if you feel up to it, maybe we could watch a movie or something."

Mom smiled up at me. "I would love to. I can't guarantee I'll stay awake for the whole thing, but I feel better when I'm not alone."

Mom picked the movie and, after I got it ready on the TV in their room, I settled into dad's side of the bed, making sure not to disturb mom too much. She must have noticed me glancing over at her every five minutes and studying her body language for signs of pain because, a half an hour into the movie, she reached out for my hand. I placed mine in hers and she squeezed lightly.

"I'm ok, Ana," she said. "I am just glad they caught it early enough that it wasn't worse."

"Mom, you wouldn't have let it get worse," I said. "You're a nurse. You see this on other women too much to ignore it on yourself."

A tear rolled toward her ear out of the corner of her eye. "But, I did ignore it."

I paused the movie and turned fully toward her. “What do you mean, mom?”

“I had been feeling this small lump in my breast for six months before I went to the doctor,” she said, tears still bubbling up from her eyes and spilling over. “I kept telling myself that I was feeling things. Or that it was totally normal. Which, sometimes it is. That’s why I didn’t tell you when I got that biopsy done. I didn’t want the whole family to worry about nothing.”

“So, what made you finally get it checked out?” I asked, tears starting to form in my eyes.

“Your dad found it,” she said.

It took me a minute to get over the grossness of what she was telling me. My parents do not still grab each other like they’re in their twenties. Ew. But this was not the time to worry about that. My mom was upset.

“Dad?” I asked.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, waiting so long,” she said. “If only I had gotten the lump checked out when I first found it. It probably would have been Stage I still and I wouldn’t have needed such radical surgery.”

“Mom, you can’t blame yourself,” I said.

“But, I do,” she said quietly, still crying rivers of tears.

I grabbed a tissue off of the nightstand and wiped her face like she used to do for me. “But it wasn’t any worse. You told me yourself, cancer cells grow insanely slowly. You caught it in time.”

“But now I only have one breast!” she said.

“Not for long, remember? Reconstruction,” I smiled at her.

“Yeah,” she said. “I remember. But I’m really not looking forward to this pain again afterward.”

“Would you rather be a uni-boob for the rest of your life?” I asked and we both let out a bubble of laughter that was probably completely inappropriate.

“No, I guess not,” she answered.

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to show you,” I said, getting up to go get my laptop.

“Show me what?” she called down the hall.

I picked my laptop up from my desk in my room and walked back into the room. “I found this really cool article online about breast cancer survivors turning their surgery scars into gorgeous tattoos. I know we couldn’t do it for a while, but it’d be ok to start brainstorming if you want to do it.”

“Show me,” she said.

* * *

On Wednesday, I got home from school before dad got home from work. I went to check on mom but she had the curtains closed and all of the lights off. Since she looked like she was lying down to sleep, I shut her door and went down to the kitchen to do my homework at the table. Issac came home and joined me. Around six, I started to get worried and hungry. Mom still hadn’t stirred and dad hadn’t called or texted to say where he was.

I decided to text dad. “You on your way?” I asked him.

He answered ten minutes later. “On my way now. Call for pizza.”

I called our usual pizza place and ordered a pepperoni pizza and dad showed up twenty minutes later. He barely said a word. He just put his jacket away and the pizza showed up before he could even sit down. He paid the delivery man and said thank you.

He set the pizza down on the kitchen counter and calmly turned to me. “When was the last time you checked on mom?” he said.

“When I got home. Why?” I asked, getting up to grab a slice of the pizza.

“She hasn’t called for you in the three hours you’ve been home?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I haven’t even heard her move. I figured she was sleeping.”

Dad looked at me with alarm then bolted to the stairs, up them, and into the room. I didn’t hear much other than dad coming to her side of the bed above us. Then, I heard crying. It started really quietly, and then gained volume as Issac and I looked at each other with guilty looks on our faces. Did we cause this by leaving her to sleep? Is she ok? Is she in pain? What is going on?

Dad stayed up there for a while so Issac and I went back to eating even though we felt guilty. When he finally came down, I had cleared the dishes Issac and I made and was sitting at the table once again, helping him with some of his homework.

“Dad,” Issac said first. “Is mom ok?”

“She’s ok physically. But we have got to check on her more often. I don’t want her to be alone for too long,” he said.

“Why?” I asked. “Did we do something wrong?”

“No, honey,” dad said. “You couldn’t have known. She isn’t feeling very happy right now. So we need to give her lots of love and support. Reassure her that she is beautiful and that we are so glad that she is going to be ok.”

“She was lonely?” I asked. “Why didn’t she say anything?”

“She won’t say anything, sweetie. Just bug her until you get a smile out of her,” dad said.

With that, he grabbed three slices of pizza and went back upstairs.

* * *

Three weeks on the dot after mom had her mastectomy, dad took her to her first chemotherapy appointment. By the time they got home, mom looked so white, like the chemo was taking the color and life from her body instead of the cancer. She immediately wanted to go to bed and dad instructed me to find a bucket that could be easily rinsed out in case she started to feel nauseous again. I was so grossed out. Chemo makes mom puke? Ew.

She didn't join us for dinner that night. I tried to tempt her with a movie afterwards but she was already asleep. Instead, I went to my room, finished what little homework I had for the night, then went to bed.

* * *

A week later, dad called my cell when I had just gotten home from school.

"I need you to take mom to her chemo appointment today. I got swamped at work from being away so often and I really need to stay until at least six again today."

"It's cool, dad. I can do it. Just do your work and get home when you can. I'll take care of mom," I said.

I looked at the calendar and noticed it was almost time to leave for her appointment. I climbed the stairs and tapped lightly on the bedroom door.

"Mom? You ready to go to your appointment?" I asked into the darkness.

"Leave me alone, Ana," I heard from the lump in the mattress.

"Come on, mom. You know this is important. We gotta get rid of all the cancer in your body. Every last cell of it," I said, still in the doorway.

Then, I heard a small sob from the lump.

“Mom? Are you crying?” I asked, opening the door further and taking a couple steps into the room.

“Oh, Ana,” she said. “I can’t leave the house like this. I just can’t!”

“Mom, you’ve been leaving in sweats for over a month. Nobody cares.”

“Not that,” she said. She sat up in bed slowly and pointed at her pillow. Lying there, on the pillow case, was a clump of my mom’s hair. She sobbed harder and I immediately went to her. I sat next to her on the bed and put an arm around her waist. She hugged me and we sat there like that for a minute. Me, the comforter, for a change; her, the receiver of the comfort.

“You know, mom,” I said after a minute. “It’s just hair.”

“What do you mean?” she said, wiping her eyes with one hand and reaching for a tissue with the other.

“Hold on,” I said. I got up and ran to my room. The doctor warned this would happen so I decided to buy mom her first scarf. It was plain, just pink and silky. But it was her favorite color, so I knew she would like it. I grabbed the gift bag from my closet and went back to her room. I handed it to her, but she just looked confused.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Open it and find out,” I said, smiling.

“It’s not my birthday or anything,” she said.

“This isn’t a birthday gift,” I said. “Open it!”

Finally, she did. She didn’t understand what it was at first but then she found the instructions for how to put it on and she looked up at me. “Oh, Ana.”

“The doctor said it was more than likely that you would lose your hair. Now that you really are, why not just shave it off and wear a scarf? Even better,” I said, pointing at the bag again.

Mom pulled out another scarf, identical to the one in her other hand. “Ana? What is this?” she asked.

I went to the closet and got the hair scissors and the electric razor. “I’m going to shave my head too,” I said. “Want to do me first?”

“But, Ana... your beautiful hair!” she said.

“Mom, it’s just hair. And to promise you that you won’t look weird and that it will grow back, I am going to shave my head too,” I said.

Mom started to cry again but I stopped her. I walked into my parents’ bathroom, put my hair in a pony tail, and cut right above the elastic. I held it up for her to see. “It’s already half done. Will you do the honors of shaving my head?” I said.

“Only if you do me the honors of shaving mine,” she said.

I called the hospital and told them that we would be late but we would be there and we set up the bathroom for the shaving party.

“You know what’s really going to be weird?” mom said as she was shaving my head.

“What?” I asked.

“When my eyebrows fall off,” she said.

I laughed. “You’re right. That is going to be weird. But at least you have a pretty scarf to distract them with!”

“That’s right,” she said.

When we finally got to the hospital, we looked amazing. We were rocking our matching head scarves, beautiful bald heads, and huge smiles.

* * *

Thursday morning, I woke up and almost screamed because I forgot about my shaved head. I caught myself and quickly clamped my hand over my mouth, stifling anything from coming out. Instead of screaming, I went about my morning routine without thinking. I got dressed in something flowy and feminine that would match my scarf and did my makeup. I moisturized my scalp with the stuff mom and I had picked up after the hospital the night before and secured the head scarf. I then realized that I was ready twenty minutes early.

“Man!” I said to myself. “Maybe I should have shaved my head a long time ago.” I chuckled at myself. That was impossible. I would only ever shave my head to support someone like my mom or my best friend.

I was confident leaving my room and even getting on the bus. But the whispers started soon after and I started to feel self-conscious. Sophie thought the scarf looked gorgeous on me and I totally trusted her opinion so it made me feel a little better. Marie got on soon after and exclaimed at how lovely it was, glaring at someone who made a stupid comment a couple rows back. Brad got on, took one look at me and smiled. I texted him a picture the night before. He gave me a thumbs up, then went to sit in his usual spot in the back.

I was nervous about how the rest of the school was going to react to me but Sophie, Marie, and Brad all stuck by me for the walk in and glared at people who looked at me weird. One girl even came up to me and told me how brave I was for shaving my head with my mom. She thought the gesture was awesome. I smiled, told her thanks, and then went off to my locker

and class. That one genuine compliment from a complete stranger was all I needed to make it through the rest of the day.

* * *

Finally. Mom's chemo rounds were finished. She was all done pumping drugs into her system that made her puke, lose her hair, get rashes on her skin, dry mouth, and the awful chemo brain. The whole time she was undergoing chemo, we had to repeat things to her multiple times and sometimes she would still forget. She even lost some words sometimes. Once, she forgot the word "spoon." We use spoons every day and she forgot what they were called. And another time, on one of her good days, she was making dinner and the pot for the pasta overflowed because she forgot that she put the water on to boil.

She went in for a final blood test and we waited patiently in one of the hospital rooms for the results. Doctors and nurses that she knew from work poured in and out of the room. It was essentially a party. There were balloons everywhere and one of the nurses even brought cupcakes for everyone. They were so happy to see my mom. I had forgotten how loved she was at her job.

When the doctor came in, he had to kick everyone out because of patient confidentiality. Not the family, of course. She needed us. But the nurses and doctors all begrudgingly said good bye and good luck and went back to their respective duties.

The door finally closed after the last nurse and the doctor turned to us. I tried to read it on his face. Happy news? Or bad news? I couldn't tell.

"Well?" mom finally said.

"You are officially cancer free," the doctor said, revealing a smile.

Mom grabbed us in a hug. She was so happy she couldn't say a word. She just hugged us and let tears of joy fall down her face instead of the tears of depression we were used to.

“Thank you, doctor,” my dad finally said for all of us. We all nodded in agreement, too happy for words. Maybe now, I could finally get my mom back.

* * *

The next day, I called Brad.

“Hello?” he answered.

“Guess what,” I said.

“Hello to you too. How are you today? Oh, I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” he said jokingly.

“Haha very funny,” I said. “So guess what!”

“I couldn’t possibly guess,” he said. “Just tell me.”

“Mom is cancer free.”

“Really? That’s great! I’m so happy for you! And for her! It must be great to have that worry gone,” he said.

“I know. Thank you,” I said. “You know, I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Really?” he asked. “What did I do?”

“You were there for me,” I said.

“I was glad to be there,” he said.

“So, do you know what this means?” I asked.

“Other than no more chemo and other scary stuff?” he asked. “No idea.

“Brad,” I said. “Would you like to go out with me for a second first date this weekend?”

“I would love to,” he said.

* * *

Mom had her reconstruction surgery a month after they declared her cancer free. She chose this way instead of the two surgeries in one day for safety because she wanted to make sure they got all of it first. I don't know how they could miss something, though. I saw her incision site once when it was close to fully healed. It looked so weird. They kept some of the skin from her breast so the reconstruction would look more natural. It looked like someone had deflated one of my mom's boobs like a balloon. My mom has always been sort of busty, but not overly busty. Busty enough where you know she had two kids but not busty enough that it looked like she had implants.

A couple days before, mom had tried to explain the reconstruction surgery to me. She said it was something called a TRAM flap. Basically she was getting a tummy tuck and a more natural result, but it sounded super scary when she was telling me about it. Mind you, my mom was not a huge woman by any means. She wasn't skinny or anything, but she wasn't fat. She said they would make the incision to collect some fat, skin, and part of the muscle from her abdomen by making an eye-shaped incision from one hip bone to the other. That is what sounded scary to me. Then they insert the appropriate amount of fat, skin, and muscle to the skin left from her mastectomy and she would, hopefully, look normal again. The doctors warned us that although the recovery time for the mastectomy was only three weeks, this surgery would take probably from six weeks to three months to recover from. My thought was that this is from the very large incision on her abdomen.

It was kind of sad to lose my mom to her bed again after having her back and stronger than ever. It felt like a step backward. But I knew this was important to my mom. She deserved to look how she wanted to look.

I told mom this before she went into surgery. She took my hand and said, “Think about it. Now, I’ll have two scars to cover up with beautiful tattoos.”

I smiled at that, remembering looking through the pictures in that article after she had her first surgery. We had so much fun, planning how she would get those tattoos. Now we would have another one to plan.

* * *

About a year after Mom was declared cancer free, a girl at school approached me and asked if mom would be willing to speak during the Survivor Ceremony at the annual Relay For Life that she and a committee put on. I told her that I would ask and when I asked mom, she was honored.

“They want *me* to speak at a ceremony for survivors?” she asked. “Am I even a survivor yet?”

“The way she was talking, it sounded like you were a survivor the minute you were diagnosed,” I said.

“Wow,” she said. “But what should I say?”

“The girl said you should share your story. She said since everyone at school heard about your diagnosis, they’ve all wanted to do something to help,” I said.

The night of the Relay, mom was nervous but excited. They gave her a sash and a t-shirt, both of which read “Survivor” in big, bold letters. I was proud.

When she was introduced, she walked up to the podium with a big smile on her face. Everyone clapped for her, including me, dad, and Issac.

“Thank you, everyone,” she started. “I am a cancer survivor.” Everyone clapped and cheered. She paused to let them, smiling, then continued. “I am a cancer survivor, but a mother, a

wife, and a nurse first. So when I noticed a small lump in my right breast, I knew what to do. I went to my doctor and they did a mammogram right there. That day we also decided a biopsy was needed. So, they stuck a very long needle straight into the questionable area and sent it to the lab. A part of me knew what it was. And when my doctor asked to talk to me a week later, my worst fears were realized. After that, I underwent a painful surgery, followed by a grueling recovery, haunting chemotherapy treatments, and a reconstructive surgery just so I could feel like a woman again. I'll never forget the day I first lost clumps of hair. Or how my daughter found me and immediately shaved my head and hers and we wore matching scarves. I'll never forget the sharp pain in my right breast after it was completely removed. And I'll never forget my husband supporting me as we climbed the stairs, just so I could be comfortable in my own bed. I'll never forget how I got so hungry one day after a chemo treatment, but I was too scared to eat. And I'll never forget how my son spoon fed me ice cream so I would feel better. And I'll never forget that I didn't puke it up for once. It was such a relief. The best part, getting the news that I was cancer free, I'll never forget that either. I'll never forget the feeling of having won this battle.

“I have watched so many women go on this journey before me, since I am a nurse. And I have a huge, newfound respect for them all for enduring this pain and coming out the other end as strong as they do. I am proud to be one of you.” She choked up a little here. “We won the battle against this disease. We are cancer free.” Everyone applauded and she walked toward us again. We engulfed her in a hug.

One of the proudest moments from that night was when they called her name to start the Survivor lap. They get to start out the whole Relay while everyone cheers them on from the sidelines. I think I cheered the loudest.

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